

Sociocultural Contexts for Language Development

Shirley Brice Heath

Language Learning

- At home versus at school
- Language socialization factors:
 - Parents' or caretakers' roles
 - Range of types of language uses
 - Exposure to the diversity of speakers, languages and in different contexts

Learning Language at School and at Home

- Educators follow a language learning curriculum for all learners
- Curriculum based on mainstream learners, different from the experiences of language minority students
- Language structure versus the ways children use language
- Ethnographers have contributed to our understanding of how children use language

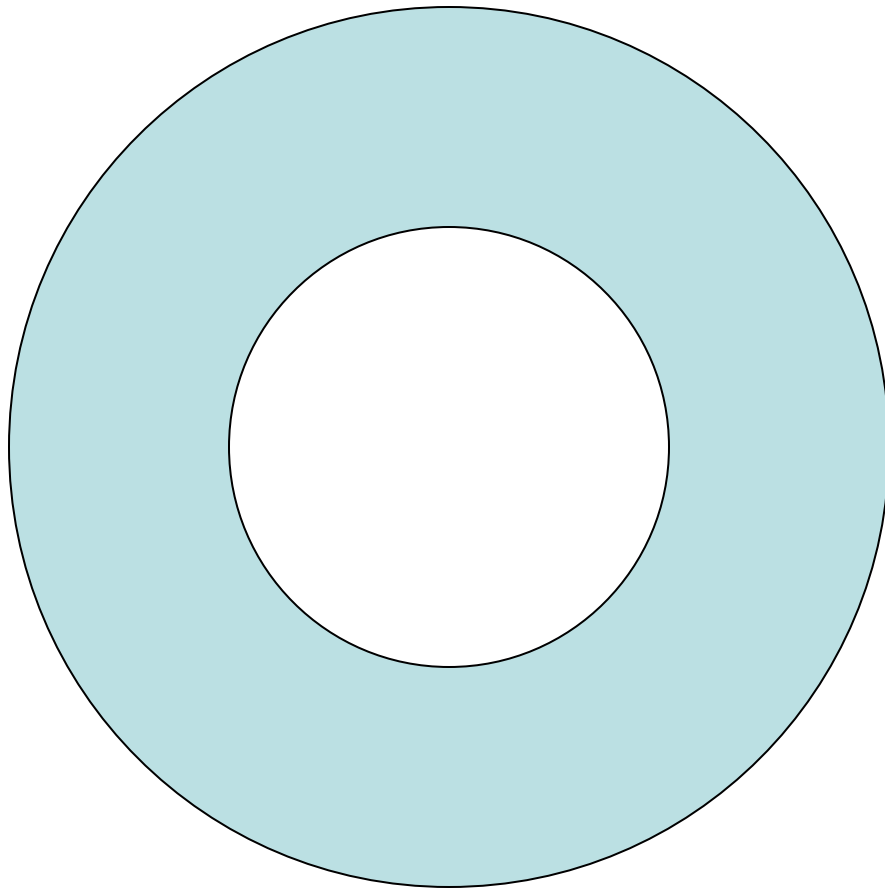
Contexts of Language Learning

- Different sociohistorical, religious, socioeconomic contexts - all language is cultural learning and contexts differ for groups of people
- “Language learning takes place within the political, economic, social, ideological, religious, and aesthetic web or relationships”

In Language Learning....

- Children learn values, relationships among family and friends, behavior, self-identity, self-esteem
- Language learning takes place in a variety of learning environments
 - Primary
 - Secondary

Primary and Secondary Social Groups



“Secondary” Institutions

- The uses of written and oral language vary
 - Specific texts require certain skills - some documents require clarification or certain action on the part of the reader; reader must be able to distinguish among the various texts
- The quality and quantity of participation by the student in secondary institutions help them in becoming successful in schools

Language Use in Secondary and Primary Institutions

- In secondary institutions, language is not explicit - not based on any kind of intimate knowledge
- Instead, oral written knowledge must be depersonalized
- Primary groups are open - they encourage the involvement of secondary institutions in early socialization of children; some are closed in accessing secondary institutions, thus, children from these contexts bring to the school a very different ways of using language than what is expected in the mainstream school.

Language Expectations (p. 106)

- Use language to label and describe.
- To recount or recast past events.
- Follow directions independently from oral and written sources.
- To sustain and maintain social interactions.
- To obtain information from different sources.
- To use language for different purposes, to connect ideas together, to create new information, to integrate ideas in unique ways.

Who Succeeds?

- Children who bring all of the language required, with the cultural norms;
- Children who can learn quickly;
- Children who succeed have the facility for using oral and written language for multiple purposes and in various styles.

Developmental Models for Learning

- The *Mainstream Model* dominates our educational system
- This model assumes a linear progression, expecting students to follow a particular sequence
- Sociocultural perspective assumes a different model - based on primary group's language socialization that influences the order and combination of language skills and uses of the child

Ethnographic Studies of Sociocultural Influences on Children's Language Development

- Parental assumptions in their role as parents and first teachers
- Genres of oral and written language
- Links between home and community institutions

Parental Assumptions

- Parents assume full responsibility for training, teaching, and nurturing children
- Parents expect children to take the greatest role in his/her development, the parent provides basic nurturing and caregiving
- Parents assume the *community* to provide social, moral, and religious development to their young

Genres of Language Uses

- Each cultural group has fundamental genres
- Genres in mainstream school-oriented communities
 - Label quests and meaning quests.
 - Recounts - known summaries
 - Accounts - for the sake of performance
 - Eventcasts - running narratives
 - Stories - many based on books

Home and Community

- Access to the genres of language use and to written texts influences children's success in school
- Children whose native language is not English will learn genres of language in their native language
- Children need extensive practice, whether in their native language or English

Implications

- The importance of providing extensive practice in using language for a variety of purposes and different genres - a curriculum that is redundant, reiterative, and integrated interdependently
- The importance of understanding how children's language develops in their primary and secondary social worlds

THE END